

In Search of an Effective Grammar Teaching Model

By Tsai-Yu Chen

Language teachers urgently need a grammar teaching model built upon theoretical insights and research findings from second language acquisition. This model must be compatible with a communicative framework that stresses meaningful (negotiated) interaction resulting from the learners' comprehension of classroom input. It should integrate *explicit grammar instruction* (EGI) with communicative language teaching (CLT). I borrow the term explicit grammar instruction, from Terrell (1991) to refer to those instructional strategies employed to raise learners' conscious awareness of the form or structure of the target language. In the following pages, I shall investigate how EGI and CLT can supplement each other to provide a new perspective for teaching grammar. Why Must Teachers Test?

Justification of EGI

Let us review current second language acquisition theory to confront the paradox that Spolsky (1989) called the notion of dual knowledge. For Krashen (1982), subconscious acquisition of comprehensible input in a low-anxiety context plays a pivotal role in developing language fluency; he sees the learning of grammar as useful only as a "monitor" and not an utterance-initiator. This theoretical claim is counterintuitive and contrary to the personal experiences of numerous language teachers who find that Krashen's theory does not encompass those students who plan and perform slowly and consciously in a way that develops into automatic behavior (Sharwood-Smith 1981). Long's findings (1983) follow the same position. After reexamining twelve studies which dealt with the effect of instruction (learning) and exposure (acquisition), Long concluded that formal instruction in grammar did make a difference.

No matter how fruitful a concept the acquisition/learning hypothesis might be, there is no experimental research available to validate Krashen's learning/acquisition distinction. McLaughlin and McLeod (1983:139) propose an information-processing approach distinguishing between controlled processes and automatic processes claiming that "complex skills are learned and routinized (i.e., become automatic) only after earlier use of controlled processes." Thus, in this approach, a learner will go through an explicit, conscious stage of learning grammar rules before s/he is able to control grammatical structures automatically. Schmidt (1990:149) summarized recent psychological research and theory on the topic of consciousness and concluded that "subliminal language learning is impossible, and intake is what learners consciously notice." He supported the notion that a consciousness-raising process is necessary for adults to learn language form, especially for redundant and communicatively less important grammatical features.

Indeed, some studies (for a full review see Canale and Swain, 1988), reporting that grammatical competence is not a good predictor for communicative competence, overestimate the role of

unconscious learning. On the contrary, a thorough search of the literature reveals that a variety of research findings favors conscious grammar learning/teaching. Some convincing research findings are worth mentioning here. Pienemman (1984, 1989) found that though psychological constraints exist on the teachability of language, EGI can make a difference. He found EGI effective when teaching grammatical features that are stage-appropriate. For example, a learner will succeed in mastering structural forms of stage $x+3$ only when the current state of the learner is at stage $x+2$. (see Footnote 1 below)

Scott (1989), analyzing data from oral and written tests taken by students of French, found that students who were taught the target structures explicitly performed better overall than those who had an implicit method of instruction. Other evidence points to the utilization of a focus on form in error correction and feedback. Tomasello and Herron (1989) compared two methods for correcting students in the language classroom and found that learners performed better if their transfer errors received immediate correction by form-based cognitive comparisons. This result corresponds to White's (1987) claim that specific grammar teaching and correction can in fact be beneficial for acquisition.

After carefully examining the role of EGI in the process of language acquisition, Terrell (1991:58-61) suggested ways in which EGI might be helpful in an acquisition-based communicative approach: 1) as an advance organizer to segment a "text" to make the input more accessible; 2) as a meaning-form focus in communicative activities to make complex morphology more comprehensible; 3) and as a tool to help learners acquire their own output in the monitoring process.

As noted by Scott (1989), EGI proponents insist on the importance of teaching rules and grammatical structures consciously for the purpose of developing communicative competence. And on the basis of their careful research findings, Canale and Swain (1988:73) defined communicative competence as follows:

In our view, an integrative theory of communicative competence may be regarded as one in which there is a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principle of discourse.

Shortcomings of CLT

The assumption that grammatical accuracy can be developed in the classroom after communication has been achieved is refuted by immersion research findings. Hammerley (1987) reviewed six studies to evaluate the effect of the immersion approach based on acquisition/natural approaches. He concluded that the grammatical competence of immersion students is characterized by fossilization or *classroom pidgin* as a result of their trying to communicate freely beyond their limited linguistic competence. He criticized any method failing to emphasize structure before communication as putting the cart before the horse. The result is

learners, who in Richard's words (1985:152) are "successful but grammatically inaccurate communicators."

It is not easy to solve this problem, but incorporating EGI within a communicatively-oriented situation may be helpful. This proposal is validated by Lightbrown and Spada's study (1990) of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided in a primarily communicative program. They found that the learners were more accurate in some aspects of grammar, if provided with instruction that explicitly dealt with grammar and correction in context.

EGI could counter another weakness noted in communicatively- oriented language teaching. In Tarvin and Al-Arishi's view (1991), the emphasis upon conspicuous action and spontaneous response in CLT discourages reflection. They argued that learners both need and desire systematic rule-analyzing and conscious learning. EGI, in getting students to consciously focus upon grammatical form, involves systematic "abstracting" and "comparing" to make a judgment which manifests the characteristics of reflection. As Rutherford (1987:160) pointed out: "the matter of raising the learners' grammatical consciousness is multifaceted and can be divided into activities that ask the learner for a judgement and those that pose a task to be performed or a problem to be solved." Ellis (1993b:11) explains that consciousness-raising may not require the learner to actually produce sentences for immediate mastery, but instead, gets him/her to apply cognitive strategies to systematize the language.

Limitations of EGI

Although the positive effects of EGI are verified by research findings, many aspects of the target language do not have rules that can be clearly formulated and easily taught or learned. Krashen (1992:409) shares this view saying that only a small portion of the total grammatical properties of a language can be consciously learned.

By measuring learners' ability to formulate rules, Green and Hecht (1992: 180) found that some rules are easy to formulate and some are relatively difficult. Hard rules, in their view, are too abstract to be described and cannot be applied mechanically. These more difficult rules are not always governed by the immediate linguistic environment and thus are difficult to practice in simple contexts. Practicing communicative activities with the focus on meaning would be a better use of class time.

A second limitation is the insufficiency of EGI to develop pragmatic competence. Sorace (1985:250-52) studied a group of non-beginners learning Italian with explicit focus on grammar in acquisition-poor environments. The results show that there was "highly significant correlation between knowledge and use," but learners could only produce "a limited range" of communicative functions and "their communicative competence was restricted." If EGI aims at developing communicative competence, the traditional concept of grammar should be redefined. Grammar rules should not be perceived as limited to the descriptions of the way in which words combine to form sentences. Rules of discourse and rules of pragmatic appropriateness should be included. According to Corder (1988), a learner not only needs "native-speaking information," but also requires plentiful "contextualized language data" to acquire rules of language use,

especially, rules of pragmatic appropriateness. Corder's suggestion acknowledges the importance of using authentic material that accurately reflects contemporary native-speaker discourse and the need for engaging learners in authentic communication to prepare learners for the kinds of discourse they will encounter outside the classroom. To address EGI's pragmatic weaknesses, explicit grammar should be taught in context of communicative activities. If the ultimate goal of most EFL courses is to enable learners to use English in real communication, Ellis (1994a:110) urges that EGI be complemented by a "functional or task-based syllabus."

A New Grammar Teaching Model

I suggest that EGI can be successful in promoting the goal of communicative competence if at least two essential characteristics of the communicative approach are applied. First, the language code can be internalized by task-based language teaching which focuses on active language use through communicative tasks rather than mechanical, meaningless language manipulation tasks. An exploratory study by Fotos and Ellis (1991) demonstrated that the adoption of a task-based approach to communicate about grammar is conducive to both learning and communication. They found that communicative grammar-based tasks helped Japanese college-level EFL learners increase their knowledge of difficult grammar rules and facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge. Second, communication in real life situations takes the form of transmission of ideas from one participant to another. Compulsory information exchange activities provide learners with opportunities to learn how their utterances are linked structurally in accord with rules of discourse. Group work on tasks involving compulsory exchange of information stimulates negotiated interaction for message-meaning and generates more modified input than activities in which exchange of information is optional (Doughty and Pica 1985).

Conclusion

If we teach grammar for communicative competence, we would be well advised to apply EGI in a communicative framework focused on task-based communicative activities. The proposed model for grammar teaching is compatible with research. Within this model, explicit grammar knowledge will be realized through contextualized language practice in communicative activities in which rules of use are presented in discourse contexts. This combination of EGI and CLT enables learners to attend to grammatical forms and language code to resolve the communication dilemma. The optimal combination of EGI and CLT activities is relative to the learner's age, cognitive maturity, proficiency level, and type of educational institution where s/he is studying.

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Footnote 1

For a successful EGI, teachers must diagnose the learner's interlanguage development to fit the structure presented in the syllabus. This is "a painstaking and time-consuming process" (Ellis, 1993a:104)